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ENGL 871

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ENGL 290 Lesson Plan: Language and Epistolary Digital Literature

One of digital literature’s greatest possibilities, and perhaps its most convoluted aspect, is how these texts manage to subvert and challenge preconceived notions of language and narrative. Understanding how digital literature reshapes concepts of language and narrative is a task both well-suited and essential for students and teachers within English courses, as the concept of what is literature and literary continues to be refined through the lens of the digital age. In many introductory level English courses, a typical syllabus will likely derive choices from the Western canon’s traditions without thought or context beyond an assumption of what is considered normal to teach at those levels. However, those assumptions – while likely rooted in a desire to teach literature that reflects human truth, value, and beauty – often fail to enable students, as Pablo Friere mentions, to see their roles “in the world and with the world as transforming rather than adaptive beings” (121). An explanation for this failure comes from the tension of teaching literature at any higher-education institution, a point that Curtis White, in his essay “The Latest Word,” summarizes well: “The institutions of literature have always worked against the *life* of the work of art as much as they have worked for it” (White).

If we grant that institutions transmit particular ideologies to students within and outside of classrooms, a strong pedagogy will present students with moments of disruption that draw attention to the narrative elements of their lives. Viewed through the lens of digital literature, narrative theory might appear to be an odd choice for a pedagogical plan; admittedly, some forms of digital poetry and text generators seem to remove or altogether ignore the concept of narrative. However, a particular advantage of digital literature is that it allows congruent tensions to exist alongside one another. Not all works of digital literature, like traditional print literature, need to contain narrative or rely on distinct story-telling elements to receive literary consideration. The medium is vast and generously avoids wide-sweeping assumptions of what “is” digital literature beyond Katherine Hayles’ definition that a text be “‘digital born, a first-generational digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer” (3). For introductory English students, presenting digital texts similar to print narrative structures creates classroom moments designed to disrupt preconceived understandings of narrative and agency. As such, if we apply narrative theory’s story-based framework to view some works of digital literature, a pedagogical approach to digital literature that focuses on epistolary elements in digital literature will present opportunities for students to grapple with concepts of narrative theory and language in ways that create awareness of agency and understanding of themselves as a narrative beings.

More specifically, these lesson plans approach narrative theory through digital texts that present some form of epistolary element. These moments create conversation within and about the narrative through some type of story-telling medium, allowing the narrative’s story – whether linear or otherwise – to be perceived and confronted by students. In *Experiencing Fiction*, James Phelan explains how “[a] broader rhetorical approach to narrative” (3) grounds narrative theory in a particular manner of story-telling: “[N]arrative can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for purpose(s) that something happened . . . the narrator tells her story to her narrate for her purposes, while the author communicates to her audience for her own purposes both that story and the narrator’s telling of it” (4). The idea of story-telling purposefully acting in a rhetorical manner is immensely important since it suggests that stories maintain a purpose, a deliberate action by an author to convey some meaning to an intended audience. In *The Language Animal*, Charles Taylor describes story as always “dealing with human meanings. And in fact, what we grasp as an important truth through a story—be it that of our own life, or of some historical event—is so bound up with how we got there—which is what the story relates—that it can’t simply be hived off, neglecting the chain of events which us there” (300). For Taylor, perceiving the human meaning within a story means that a person must confront the past narrative that led to that moment; these works, while all story-based, allow students to move between discussions of the author as story-teller, the text as story-teller, and, ultimately, how story functions within what Taylor calls the “social imaginary” (171), a term that describes how people “imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others . . . and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (*A Secular Age* 171).

For an introductory English class, these lesson plans select works of digital literature that rely on understood and recognizable epistolary mediums – letters, journals, audio clips, and passports – to create those moments of confrontation. In the interactive fiction game *Anchorhead*, students encounter questions of agency, narrative disruption, and digital topography as they navigate the New England town of Anchorhead through the eyes of an aspiring writer. The game’s heavy emphasis on narrative text-delivery and adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft’s writing style shows how digital literature presents players, even those familiar with print volumes of Lovecraftian horror, with questions of agency within imagined worlds. In *Papers, Please*, the game uses passports and other legal documents to raise questions of identity and agency as players navigate contact zones and language’s potential inability to convey a person’s worth. Similarly, *Gone Home* represents an evolution of interaction fiction into an inhabitable space; the game deploys nostalgia for a past relationship to deliver a story rooted in language and non-linear narrative through player discoveries of journal entries spread throughout an abandoned home. In turn, the game couples computer graphics, audio, and text to construct a nonlinear space meant to disorient our understanding of digital topography and how we process story. Lastly, *That Dragon, Cancer* is an autobiographical experience concerned with faith, narrative, and digital embodiment; as players relive the story of the Green family (who lost their son Joel to cancer at a young age) through journal entries, audio recordings, and multiple narrative perspectives, the confessional elements of the game create an odd tension against the game’s limited player agency and linear story. The end result is a digital experience that displaces students, challenging their understanding of story and language as means to convey human meaning and experience. Ultimately, each piece of literature will challenge, complement, and redefine conceptions of narrative, agency, and language. In turn, students learn to see digital literature as a place of unique literary value. These texts broaden their conceptions of what they consider literature, creating awareness of agency and narrative, and redefine language and digital texts as aspects of intermediation.

ENGL 871: Lesson Plan #1 for ENGL 290: Survey of 20th Century Literature

**Instructor’s Name:** Nathan Valle

**Session Title:** Learning to Play: *Anchorhead*, Interactive Fiction, and Language

**Assigned work for and before this class:**

1. **Review:** H.P. Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” (already taught during an earlier class)
2. **Review:** William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” (already taught during an earlier class)
3. **Read:** Interactive Fiction Introduction
   1. <http://microheaven.com/ifguide/>
4. **Play:** Interaction Fiction *Anchorhead*
   1. <http://pr-if.org/play/anchorhead/>

**Justification for Lesson Plan:**

Most of my ENGL 290 Survey of 20th Century Literature syllabus revolves around three primary forms of literature: drama, poetry, and short fiction. Each form is given three-to-four weeks of study during the semester, so the switch to digital literature would occur in the final few weeks of classwork. Students will already be familiar with Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” before this class, so teaching *Anchorhead* represents a revisiting of the key distinction between plot and story. Additionally, Faulkner’s text presents a distinctly non-linear narrative to convey a sense of southern grotesqueness and horror, so shifting to *Anchorhead* allows us to experience that same non-linearity through a work of interactive fiction. Additionally, assigning Lovecraft’s “At the Mountains of Madness” for discussion will familiarize students with his writing style, tone, and content, three elements adapted into *Anchorhead’s* text-based delivery.

The primary objective of the lesson is to allow students to experience what Hayles’ calls intermediation, “a framework in which digital literature can be understood as creating recursive feedback loops among embodied practice, tacit knowledge, and explicit articulation” (131). Since students have primarily interacted with physical texts until this point, *Anchorhead’s* interactivity creates an awareness of reciprocation between reader and technology; as they communicate and control the story’s unnamed protagonist, they will experience the game’s story – presented through the game’s journal-esque text-box, a feature common to most interactive fictions – in a way that confronts them with their mental perception and physical involvement with narrative, a connection Hayles labels “a recursive feedback loop between knowledge realized in the body . . . and knowledge realized in the neocortex as conscious and unconscious articulations” (132).

**Learning Objectives:**

1. To analyze *Anchorhead*, and the genre of interactive fiction,as a form of epistolary narrative
2. To identify ways technology communicates knowledge through physical interaction and mental processes (connecting directly to Hayles’ concept of intermediation)
3. To introduce interactive fiction as a new and expansive medium of literature

**Lesson Activity Plan**

1. The first portion of class (roughly 20 minutes) will be spent discussing Interactive Fiction and briefly reviewing the medium’s history.
   1. I’ll forecast how many video games – some of which the class will play – connect directly to interactive fiction.
   2. We’ll also review particular scenes from *Anchorhead* – I’ll have multiple save states so we can examine scenes from across the game’s three day plot.
2. The second section of class (30 minutes) will be group work; students will gather into groups of three to four people and will be tasked to answer these questions:
   1. How does *Anchorhead* adapt and expand Lovecraft’s lore and style into a game?
      1. What is familiar about the setting and other stylistic elements?
   2. Thinking back to Faulkner, what makes this game’s presentation of plot and story non-linear and why is that important?
   3. Think about the text-box we play through: how does it change our approach to the game’s language?
      1. Does the interactivity distract or focus us compared to a print narrative?
   4. Final question – I’ll ask each group to discuss three terms: player, user, and reader. Which term best describes their experience.
3. From those discussions and during the final portion of class (20 minutes), we’ll complete an exercise in digital topography; together, we’ll recreate the game’s setting and map. I’ll ask students to name different places in the game and to describe what occurred there, and we’ll work to create a map that resembles a series of squares rather than a traditional three-dimensional canvas.
   1. The goal is help students understand how mental processes have supplied the imaginative elements needed to make sense of the game’s non-linear space and narrative. They “moved” through the game through physically interacting with the dialogue box, but spacial orientation – and any sense of what Raley labels “recurrence” (47), the idea that we can alter and revisit digital spaces – occurs through intermediation between mind, body, and technology.
   2. This same activity brings to light the text’s ergodic qualities, and students will thus be attuned to their role in shaping and exposing a text’s narrative.

**Post-Class Assignment**

1. Create a working definition of the term “intermediation” along with answering this question: how is this idea already part of your life?

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ENGL 871: Lesson Plan #2 for ENGL 290: Survey of 20th Century Literature

**Instructor’s Name:** Nathan Valle

**Session Title:** *Papers, Please* and Moments of Confrontation

**Assigned work for and before this class:**

1. **Read:** Espen Aarseth’s essay: “A Narrative Theory of Games” (9 pgs.)
   1. Available through EBSCOhost
2. **Play:** Computer game *Papers, Please*
   1. Available through the *Steam* digital game platform (required)

**Justification for Lesson Plan**

Since students have already viewed an interactive fiction, *Papers, Please* represents a shift into more traditional digital literature; the game bills itself as a “Dystopian Document Thriller,” as students step into the role of an immigration officer who controls a border crossing and is responsible for screening travelers. The game’s mechanics require us to evaluate passports to determine legitimate travelers and those who attempt to falsify entry into the country (or those who admit they don’t meet requirements for entry). The passports serve as epistolary moments of confrontation, as students are forced to consider their approach to each individual’s source of identity – the passport – and choose how to reveal the game’s plot. Within *Papers, Please, s*tory and narrative, similar to *Anchorhead*, become ergodic, a term that Aarseth describes in *Cybertexts: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* as “nontrivial effort . . . required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1), and invite us to understand how we interact with the text and how we perceive story.

**Learning Objectives**

1. To reemphasize “ergodic literature”
2. To experience another work of digital literature
3. To explore the relationship of narrative, story, plot, and interaction within digital literature

**Lesson Activity Plan**

1. The first portion of class (30 minutes) will be spent reviewing and discussing the text.
   1. Discussion Questions:
      1. What were your impressions of the game?
      2. What problems did you encounter in the text (ethical/practical)?
      3. We’ll explore the particular endings here too – since the game offers twenty different endings, we’ll explore which ones students found and what decisions led them to a particular ending.
      4. How did your perception of your role in the game – the border guard – change as you revisited the job again and again?
         1. What changed? Why?
2. The second and final section of class (40 minutes) will be a digital exercise – students have brought their computers to class, so I will ask them to open the game and find a character/moment that impacted them as they played. They’ll write a one-page response answering three questions, which we’ll then discuss together.
   1. What about that person’s story or identity resonated with you?
   2. How did the knowledge within the passport conflict with that character’s narrative?
      1. This second question connects to the epistolary element; the passport creates an awareness of that character’s story, and students will grapple with how and why knowledge shaped their creation of the narrative.
   3. Imagine yourself as an immigrant who has to pass the border – what kind of information would be included in your passport? How does that information create a narrative that would convince a guard your story is convincing?

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ENGL 871: Lesson Plan #3 for ENGL 290: Survey of 20th Century Literature

**Instructor’s Name:** Nathan Valle

**Session Title:** *Gone Home* – Stories and Confessions

**Assigned work for and before this class:**

1. **Read**: Kevin Veale’s “*Gone Home*, and the Power of Affective Nostalgia” (12 pgs.)
2. **Play**: Computer Game *Gone Home*
3. **Prepare**: Screenshots from *Gone Home* gameplay for an in-class activity

**Justification for Lesson Plan**

*Gone Home* is an example of digital topography and epistolary digital literature, as the game’s plot is slowly revealed to players through various journals that are found throughout the game’s single setting: an abandoned home. These journals, much like *Anchorhead’s* interactive text-box and *Paper, Please’s* passports, serve as narrative moments of confrontation; Kevin Veale mentions that these journals, paired with the game’s nostalgic elements, “creat[e] a storytelling context that is at once familiar and alien” (Veale) for the player and for students in a literature classroom. The lesson will explore how these journals shape our understanding and presence in a digital text, reexamining and applying the idea of “ergodic literature” within a modern game.

**Learning Objectives**

1. To reemphasize and provide another example of “ergodic literature”
2. To experience another work of digital literature
3. To explore the relationship between knowledge and narrative, as well as how our awareness of place and intermediation creates agency
4. To examine the relationship of journals as sources of knowledge and as moments of narrative confrontation

**Lesson Activity Plan**

1. The majority of class (45 minutes) will be a discussion of the game’s nostalgic elements, narrative, and how the game functions as ergodic literature; as we talk, I’ll ask students to open the game and retrieve their pre-created screenshots, list what items they found in their playthrough, and discuss why these items are present in the game.
   1. As they make a list of physical objects they remember encountering, we’ll eventually make a connection to the game’s journals. The game’s 1995 setting, as revealed in an interview, reflects their perspective of how technology shifted the way we communicate, so journals represent a distinct and purposeful shift away from our modern era: “‘What’s the most recent year where all of the interesting stuff you’re finding would not be in text messages and email . . . [f]or Gone Home to work, you need to be able to find handwritten notes between people and turn on the answering machine and find all of this physical evidence of what went on. If we set it any later than ’95, they’d have AOL. Somebody would be using a pager’” (Veale).
   2. Once we have established journals as a distinct medium, I’ll ask students to consider, engage, and discuss how the journals work to fulfill what Taylor identifies as a fundamental purpose of narrative: “[Y]ou come after a long chain of experiences to an insight, about what’s important in your life, or in human life in general” (*The Language Animal* 301).
      1. We’ll consider this on three levels:
         1. How did these journals impact you as a human? What did you experience or feel?
         2. How did these journals impact you as a player of the game? What choices did you make differently as a result of beginning, as Aarseth mentions, to “designif[y] . . . the gaps” (112)?
         3. How did these journals impact your understanding of their writer?
2. During the final section of class (25 minutes), we’ll watch portions of a lecture from the game’s creators about narrative, non-linearity, and level design.
   1. <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1022112/Level-Design-in-a-Day>
   2. We’ll watch the sections “*Gone Home*: Linear Story, Non-Linear Space,” It’s an Illusion,” “Shape of a House/Shape of a Story,” and *Gone Home* House.”
      1. After watching, I’ll ask students to discuss to the creator’s revelation that “the game’s non-linearity is an illusion” and how that changes their perception of the text.
         1. The goal of the discussion is to help students realize how narratives overwhelm us, yet epistolary works of digital literature provide us with the necessary means – in this case, journals – to confront and ask questions about our relationship with the text. As we consider the creator’s attempt to work with nostalgia and familiarity that people have with their memories, we’ll consider if the game’s author achieved this effect and how that reflects our interactivity with the game.

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ENGL 871: Lesson Plan #4 for ENGL 290: Survey of 20th Century Literature

**Instructor’s Name:** Nathan Valle

**Session Title:** *That Dragon, Cancer* – Stories and Confessions

**Assigned work for and before this class:**

1. **Play**: Computer Game *That Dragon, Cancer*
2. **Read**: Jason Tanz’s essay “A Father, a Dying Son, and the Quest to Make the Most Profound Videogame Ever”
   1. <https://www.wired.com/2016/01/that-dragon-cancer/>

**Justification for Lesson Plan**

*That Dragon, Cancer* represents an appropriate conclusion to the semester. The game’s chapters function as epistolary autobiography from the lives of Ryan and Amy Green as they wrestle with their son’s cancer diagnosis. However, unlike our other digital literature texts, this game purposefully inverts our sense of reward and narrative; as we complete game-like tasks and activities, the game’s limited player agency, narrative, and linearity reveal themselves. The goal is to encourage students to see digital literature texts, including video games, as more than simply an interactive medium; digital texts demand we note how others use language and narrative to create awareness of our relationship to technology, others, and self through the process of intermediation. *That Dragon, Cancer’s* creators purposefully stripped the game of rewarding activities typically associated with game progression; our role within the text is simply to exist with the Green family. As such, I want to expose students to the idea that digital literature can be intensely autobiographical and epistolary, and our encounter with these texts challenge and expand our understanding of intermediation, narrative, and player agency.

**Learning Objectives**

1. To explore autobiography as a means of communication
2. To discuss perspective and agency within digital literature
3. To connect our understanding of story-telling and perspective to students lives, their families, and their communities

**Lesson Activity Plan**

1. We’ll begin the first section of class (30 minutes) discussing student experiences and what they found notable about *That Dragon, Cancer*. In the process, we’ll detail all the various ways the game communicated directly to us through epistolary forms.
   1. The game’s subject matter is emotionally draining, and I want students to note how the game presents moments of respite during its linear narrative.
      1. Epistolary elements they’ll find:
         1. Brief audio introductions to each chapter
         2. Dated journal entries from Ryan and Amy Green
         3. Letters the Greens received from other families suffering similar circumstances
         4. Children’s books with personal messages written to Joel, the Greens’ son
         5. Audio recordings from various narrative moments
      2. We’ll discuss several key moments throughout the game and reflect on how and why the narrative is presented using that epistolary element.
2. During the remainder of class (40 minutes), we’ll spend time working in pairs (2 students per group) exploring how the characters in the game consciously became aware of intermediation.
   1. Ultimately, we’ll seek to answer this question: just as the Greens became aware of how their experiences with hospital technology and the process of making the game changed them, how do we properly articulate and understand these experiences of digital literature as readers? What elements in the game *require* that it be presented as digital literature?
      1. As they answer the question, I’ll ask them to point to a moment in the game where they found awareness of intermediation occurring (the narrators often comment about their relationship to technology and human existence, so ample examples exist for students to find and discuss).
      2. The goal is help students understand that consuming, using, thinking about, and encountering digital technology means that intermediation is already occurring – the question becomes how to draw awareness to that idea, drawing back to Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary. Do we know how we are changed before, during, and after these moments?

**Post-Class Homework and Assignment**

1. Each class I teach requires a final portfolio submission as part of the Final Exam for the course. Because we’ve examined letters as narrative moments of confrontation and as a medium of digital intermediation, part of this final portfolio would require the submission of four journals written about these experiences. I would ask students each week to grapple with the story-telling elements of each text, but, more importantly, I would also stress students to explore and wrestle with several areas in their journals:
   1. Explain and discuss how this text attempts to be ergodic literature.
   2. How does language impact and shape our perception of knowledge within this text’s epistolary elements?
   3. Consider the time and place where you experienced this text – if you think about Hayles’ concept of intermediation, how did you prepare yourself for this idea and experience it as you played?

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